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ABSTRACT

Proposing that Socratic seminars can lead to true educational reform, this article examines the use of these seminars to enlarge elementary and secondary students' understanding of ideas and to encourage instruction that is not restricted by established syllabi, courses, or examinations. Socratic discussion is lacking in most classrooms but should be combined with subject-related lectures, textbooks, and basic skills learning, such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and mathematical calculation, for an effective education. The purpose of Socratic seminars is to enlarge students' understanding of ideas, issues, and values through intensive conversation about selected and related topical resource materials. Socratic teaching: (1) emphasizes rigorous thinking, not mastery of facts; (2) stresses that a leader's questions should promote serious conversation, not evoke correct answers; and (3) engages students in a collaborative quest for information. This article considers how both students and teachers benefit, the role of teachers as discussion group leaders, and the implementation of Socratic seminars in elementary, junior high, and senior high schools. (JHP)

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Socratic Seminars: Basic Education and Reformation

by

Dennis Gray

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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Introduction
Seminars and Instructional Reform

Where to begin? That's a crucial question—or ought to be—when we speak of restructuring our schools. Everyone seems to agree that some such thing should be done; the rhetorical bandwagon is careening madly along, drawn and pushed by unions and academics, politicians and administrators. Let's change the training of teachers, the governance of schools, the assessment of all and sundry: these are the battle cries. So overwhelming does the task suddenly loom that the impossibility of meaningful change seems inevitable—and perhaps that's the point for many. No change means no threat.

Well, we at the Council for Basic Education believe, even insist, that change must come about if our schools, especially our public schools, are to meet the social, political, and economic challenges of the next several decades. And we have a good idea of where to start.

Where better than with the most essential element of schooling, the place of contact between students, teachers, and subjects? I mean, of course, instruction. We see massive evidence that traditional methods of instruction, i.e. teachers speaking at children who sit passively and absorb, are often ineffective, often self-defeating. Organizations such as Mortimer Adler's Paideia Group and Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, however, have begun to stake out important new visions and methods of teaching and learning. They build, I am proud to say, on much that the Council for Basic Education has developed and advocated for many years.

All the more reason, then, that Dennis Gray, Deputy Director of CBE and a member of the Paideia Associates, should speak in this issue of ***Basic Education: Issues, Answers, and Facts*** to the most important and revolutiontary (and, not so oddly, most ancient) of aspects of restructured instruction: the Socratic seminar. Instituting such seminars can be the keystone for true reform in our schools.

A. Graham Down
Executive Director
The Council for Basic Education

Socratic Seminars: Basic Education and Reformation

by Dennis Gray

Socrates had no syllabus. He wanted Athenians to think for themselves. No wonder the local authorities were disturbed. That's the way it is with authorities. They love a syllabus, and they get very upset when learning goes on without one. Inevitably, they decided that Socrates was subversive.

Of course the authorities were correct. Socrates *was* subversive, not just because he asked questions rather than gave answers. And not because he encouraged his young followers to do the same. More because he stood for careful thinking and clear expression, for finding and weighing evidence, for exploring differing views, and especially for giving orthodoxy no more automatic credence than competing ideas. Socrates believed that teaching students to think for themselves was more important than teaching them all the Right Answers. Socrates was put to death by the authorities who wanted him to stick to their syllabus—the one that resolutely adhered to Coverage of all the Right Answers. It would not be far-fetched to say that Socrates was a martyr for basic education.

Of all the major contemporary proposals for the reform of schooling, only Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal* (1982) is truly subversive in the way that Socrates was in ancient times and the Council for Basic Education is today. Of Paideia's several proposed reforms, the most important (and difficult to accomplish) is the use of Socratic seminars to enlarge students' understanding of ideas. Seminars so defined are divorced from orthodox disciplines, courses, and examinations in required subjects. Socratic seminars differ from typical class discussions that are thinly disguised question-and-answer sessions in which Coverage and Right Answers in the Required Subjects are the paramount concerns of the teachers. Socratic seminars are subversive, not only because they deviate from these norms, but also because they lead to dissatisfaction with the ways schools ordinarily carry on.

Effective schooling should include Socratic seminars as one of three kinds of teaching and learning. The other two modes are didactic instruction (mainly through lectures and textbooks), which has the laudable aim of helping students acquire organized knowledge in the various academic subjects, and coaching in the all-important fundamental skills of academic learning (such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and mathematical calculation). These three modes of teaching and learning are interrelated, obviously, and commonly are found side by side, even though a good teacher will have one as the controlling purpose of a given lesson. In most schools, of course, Socratic discussion is altogether lacking, a fact that goes far to explain the deplorable state of critical thinking in America's schools.

Schools wanting to correct this deficiency can start by introducing seminars: for example, one seminar each week for all students (two hours long in the later grades, shorter ones in the early grades). This is a reasonable choice of first step, because seminars have far-reaching implications for teaching methods, curriculum, testing, weekly and daily schedules, class arrangements, and teacher training. But seminars provide a convenient and manageable entry to the larger process of comprehensive reform.

The purpose of seminars is always to enlarge understanding of ideas, issues, and values through intensive conversation about selected texts. It is not the central purpose of seminars to add to students' storehouses of

organized knowledge, although new knowledge is a common by-product. Nor is the purpose of seminars to strengthen the skills of academic learning, although seminars certainly do give lots of practice in close reading, careful listening, clear speaking, and precise thinking. In other words, genuine understanding of intellectual complexities demands ever-improving knowledge and skills, but understanding remains the goal. Thus seminars epitomize what the Council for Basic Education advocates as schooling that should be common to all students.

Good texts are essential. The word is texts, not textbooks. Textbooks contain knowledge organized and presented for a didactic purpose; by definition, they are not discussable, which is what seminar texts must be. Being discussable means being rich in ideas, issues, and values, in complexities and ambiguities, perhaps in contradictions or mysteries. Being discussable means being food for thought. A text might be a poem, a play, a painting. A novel, an essay, a tract, a sermon. A speech, a film, a ballet. Literature, history, art, philosophy, science, mathematics. The possibilities are almost boundless. Texts are artifacts to be studied as the basis for extended conversation about ideas. In short, a seminar is a high road to thoughtfulness, the ultimate goal of basic education.

How Teachers Benefit

Thoughtfulness about the more important ideas, issues, and values in our lives, though central to the work of the Council for Basic Education, has never been a matter of much concern for schools and colleges. So when teachers experience Socratic instruction for the first time, they turn out to be as excited about seminars as their students are, and they benefit as much from the seminar method as students do—maybe more.

Who would not be pleased to engage in the kind of learning that everyone enjoys and wants but that usually gets preempted by schools' relentless pursuit of Coverage and Right Answers at a pace set by a jam-packed but superficial syllabus?

Even though many teachers have enrolled in so-called seminars somewhere in their formal education, few have ever experienced the kind of learning that occurs in a Socratic seminar. The differences between ordinary schooling and Socratic teaching and learning are several in number and great in significance.

- ☐ Socratic seminars are dedicated to understanding a text, not merely ingesting it. Seminars abandon Coverage as a means or an end. Suppose Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is the text. A seminar might focus on, say, King's ideas of just and unjust laws, or his justification for civil disobedience, or his views of moderation versus extremism in pursuit of social justice. In two hours of talk, one group of people in a seminar might touch on all three topics, another seminar on only one. The main task is to enlarge understanding, not to learn about King or the events of the civil rights movement, even though some knowledge about King and the movement will surely be gained.
- ☐ Seminars demand rigorous thinking, not mastery of facts by the participants. Unlike a lecture, a seminar has no predetermined notion of what particular understanding will be accomplished or how the seminar itself will proceed. The leader starts with an opening question based on close study of the text, listens carefully to responses and gently moves the conversation along in accordance with what actually is said by the participants, rather than in deference to a preset outline.
- ☐ A leader's questions are designed to promote serious conversation, not to evoke correct information. Information assumes a subordinate role as servant to understanding.
- ☐ Seminars engage students in a collaborative quest for understanding, in a mutual testing of each other's ideas about a text. Competition for Right Answers has no useful function in seminars.

A seminar is a high road to thoughtfulness, the ultimate goal of basic education.

For many teachers this new experience is unfamiliar and therefore somewhat frightening. As they get the hang of it, however, their enthusiasm builds along with their self-confidence, and they come to recognize seminars as a powerful source of renewal for their own learning as well as a potent way to activate students' minds.

The Virtues of Ignorance

Being an expert can be a liability in a seminar. It can close the mind to a new experience that doesn't happen to square with what an expert already "knows." In common with more familiar and informal kinds of conversations—at parties, over a meal, or on an airplane—conversation in a seminar progresses best when it is conducted among equals.

Experts often don't much care for such equality. It's a threat; it's uncomfortable. They prefer the security of superior knowledge, or already having answers to any questions that might come up. For this reason, experts can easily disrupt a seminar. They tend to dominate, especially if the other people in the group are non-experts, who for their part retire into silence.

Or the experts engage each other in scholarly debates, using arguments and evidence that only they comprehend. The result is the same: no conversation, but a lot of expert talk and a group of passive spectators—not a seminar.

Picture seminars on Sophocles' *Antigone*, an ancient Greek play that pits a young woman against a king anxious to consolidate his power. *Antigone* has ample grist for intellectual conversation. It's packed with conflicts between opposing ideas, all eminently discussable. Woman versus man. Young versus old. Religious duty versus civic duty. Individual versus state. Non-violence versus violence. Choice versus fate. Good stuff for intellectual conversation in seminars—provided participants all see themselves as equals when they stand before the text and begin conversation aimed at enlarging their understanding of some of these issues.

Seminars demand rigorous thinking, not mastery of facts by the participants.

Enter the experts, brains packed with information about Sophocles, other Greek dramatists, Greek civilization, the history of wars among Greek city-states, Greek mythology and religious beliefs, the conventions of Greek theater, and the problems of translation from ancient Greek into modern English. The experts might be the leaders of seminars or the participants. In either case, they can't resist a chance for show and tell, so discussion of the important ideas in the text gets shouldered aside in favor of performances by the experts.

Some teachers have a hard time capturing the main purpose of seminars and an even harder time restraining their impulse to indulge their expert knowledge when an occasion arises for employing it. When this happens, seminars go awry and become events that frustrate everybody involved. Why might this happen?

Perhaps because the standing of teachers usually depends so much on authority derived from knowledge—expert knowledge. Teaching used to enjoy much greater social authority and legal authority than are now associated with it. Maybe expertise is the last bastion of teacherly authority.

What really prepares the mind for Socratic seminars is ignorance, not authority. Here one must think of conscious ignorance, the state of mind that seeks greater understanding of complex ideas, that is willing to forego demonstrations of prior knowledge, that willingly risks being off the mark, that wants to hear what others think, that is eager to wrestle collectively with a difficult text despite the discomfort of wearing no cloak of expertise. Conscious ignorance thus defined is a great equalizer. For many teachers this is terra incognita and fearsome indeed. For teachers who understand the potential of seminars and who know themselves well enough, the anxiety produced by a seminar on an unfamiliar topic is a sure signal that real learning is possible, as opposed to rehearsal of what is already known.

To help teachers make this emotional and practical shift from authority figure to seminar learner and leader is one of the main purposes of the workshops offered by the Paideia Associates, a group of some twenty teachers, principals, and other educators. The training always entails many seminars and shorter practice sessions designed to engage participating teachers and administrators in two kinds of experiences. First is the experience of reading different sorts of texts as the basis of discussions and mastering the mechanics of the seminar. The second type of experience occurs simultaneously and is the more important. It is the experience of ignorance, of being a student, a novice in an unfamiliar form of learning, a newcomer with all the feelings of insecurity that come with the role. These feelings are the very opposite of those associated with being the expert, the all-knowing authority figure, the polished didactic teacher of organized knowledge, or the confident coach of academic skills.

When teachers first find themselves in this situation, some fall silent. Others resort to their expertise and begin to flaunt it, as in the example of the seminar on *Antigone*. It's as though the former group is saying, "Since I don't know enough about *Antigone* and I might show my ignorance if I speak, I'm going to be quiet." The lat-

ter group—the experts—seem to be saying, "Since I am unfamiliar with this seminar format, and I surely don't want to look foolish, I'll just lecture the group on what I already know about *Antigone*." Is there any teacher who has not seen these forms of escape and evasion in the classroom?

Experts can easily disrupt a seminar.

Seminars empower teachers to move beyond these nonconstructive behaviors and discover that a rigorous conversation among equals whose equality derives from a close reading of a common text opens the mind to a kind of learning that simply cannot occur with purely didactic instruction, which does require expertise. Seminars give teachers themselves, not just their students, the bracing experience of genuine collaboration in the pursuit of understanding. Teachers who have undergone the training report that the benefits multiply when they return to their schools and begin to implement the program. They usually commence a series of monthly faculty seminars as a way to practice their nascent seminar leading skills. They critique each other in these seminars, and they begin to visit each other's classes to observe seminars with students and to provide commentary and advice to their colleagues. They may try videotaping seminars in order to see themselves at work and to give students a chance to do the same. They confer about the selection of texts for use in seminars and compare notes about which texts and opening questions have proved more successful.

In short, the introduction of Socratic seminars, according to many teachers, takes the curse off confessing ignorance and establishes habits of collegiality and mutual support.

Elementary Aspects of Seminars

When they first consider the idea of having Socratic seminars as a regular feature of instruction, most teachers and administrators assume that seminars will work only in high schools. This assumption is wrong.

The experience of the many elementary, middle, and high schools that have begun regular Socratic seminars is that they work well for students of all ages and of all abilities, not just those in high school. The younger the participants are, the more readily they catch on to the main purpose of seminars and master the basic techniques. Older participants, by contrast, seem almost addicted to habits of superficial study, passive learning, and flaccid conversation that undermine the seminar. Thus the transformation wrought by good seminars is both more painful and more dramatic for high school students than for their elementary counterparts who are not yet fully indoctrinated in the gamesmanship of schooling.

Elementary schools already are better suited to such a revolution than are secondary schools. They have fewer teachers restricted to single disciplines; the boundaries between academic subjects are not so forbidding and teachers cross them routinely; they tend to be hospitable to new forms of instruction.

These characteristics of elementary schools mesh with the properties of a good seminar program. Seminars should not be the special preserve of any academic department or subject in the usual sense. Any properly trained teacher can lead a seminar on a work that is truly discussable, that is, one rich in ideas. So math teachers can lead seminars on literature, literature teachers on science, and science teachers on history. Being properly trained entails only 20 to 40 hours of guided practice for most teachers to gain the skill and confidence needed to lead seminars. Teachers always enjoy the advantage of being older, more experienced, and more mature than their students.

Seminars give teachers themselves, not just their students, the bracing experience of genuine collaboration in the pursuit of understanding.

In addition to understanding that seminars need not be—indeed, should not be—drawn exclusively from the leaders' strongest teaching disciplines, and that works suitable for seminar discussion can be found in any of the academic traditions, there are other reasons for divorcing seminars from particular subjects in the curriculum. Consider the curse of Coverage: the obsessive con-

cern with exposure to every detail in a syllabus given over to minutiae. Coverage is the enemy of thoughtfulness, and because it is the prime mover of a typical 1980s curriculum, seminars—so different in purpose and method—must be placed outside that curriculum.

Separating seminar topics from the regular curriculum presents schools with other benefits. Imagine what can happen when, say, all fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in a school participate in seminars on the Declaration of Independence within a two-week period. Such an event prompts conversation among teachers as they prepare. Moreover, it creates intellectual common ground for students that ordinarily does not exist at all. Finally, it can easily become an opportunity for properly trained seminar leaders who are not regular teachers to work directly with students. This category might include principals, central office staff, superintendents, parents, interested citizens, and former teachers—anyone who is willing to complete the necessary training.

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Another common error is that Socratic seminars require the reading of a certain canon of Great Books. The corollary of this shibboleth is that students in elementary school "can't handle such material." It is certainly true that many so-called Great Books aptly match the criterion of being rich in ideas—important ideas—and so are worthy of extended and intensive discussion. It's important to be clear about this point though. Dozens of works outside a traditional canon, complete works and excerpts, old and new, well known and little known, mainstream and tributary, by women and men, by thinkers and creators in every culture, from all races and ethnic groups, and at various levels of difficulty, have been discovered by teachers and used successfully in seminars.

A third grade teacher in Washington, D.C. recently led a highly effective hour-long discussion of ideas in *The Velveteen Rabbit*. This wonderful children's story about the interplay of imagination and reality probably is not on anyone's list of Great Books, yet the level of conversation was quite sophisticated. This was so largely because the children rose to the challenge of talking about ideas that underlie the deceptively simple plot.

What one sees in such seminars is revealing for anyone wondering how they will work, how they will fit into and change the reality of today's schools: students learning the protocol of intellectual conversation; willing reference to the text to support arguments or observations; effective questioning of fellow students; growing respect for other students' ideas when they are well defended; keen interest in keeping facts straight while wrestling with "why" questions; reduced reliance on the teacher and correspondingly greater self-reliance to make the seminar successful. In short, a new ethos prevails.

Teachers find that they have to listen carefully to understand the intended meanings of students' statements and to keep track of the flow of ideas. If they themselves have genuinely thought-provoking questions, there are none of the dead spots that novice leaders often fear.

Further, they quickly discover seminars to be a powerful diagnostic method for revealing strengths and weaknesses in students' reading, speaking, listening, reasoning, and classroom social skills. They are also good occasions for on-the-spot coaching to correct minor faults and to determine who needs extra coaching and practice in these skills apart from the seminar setting.

One can imagine what schools might become after four or five years, when the effects that are now only seedlings have matured and blossomed. More important, seminars give teachers a clearer sense of the excellence that can be achieved in a school where all the students in every grade regularly and frequently participate in Socratic discussion of the ideas that define our culture.

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